

# GO WITH THE FLOW: HE YUNCHANG'S PERFORMANCE ART AT NIAGARA FALLS

By Bingyi Huang

On October 25, 2005, He Yunchang, a Chinese performance artist, hit the headlines internationally. *The New York Times* summed up the story in one line: "A Chinese performance artist appeared in city court (Buffalo) for wading naked into the rapids above Niagara Falls as part of a stunt that went wrong."

The Chinese media, however, projected a different picture. In the latest reenactment of *Dialogue with Water*, He most certainly became the first Chinese national in history to attempt a stunt above Niagara Falls. Upon learning the news, the Chinese consulate general contacted one of the curators to express concern about He's "safety."

The source for the frenzy about this event lies in Niagara Falls. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack, the US-Canadian border became a sensitive site due to the fact that a number of terrorists entered the US via Canada. Furthermore, He's (intended) performance reawakened the memory of another local event in which Chinese businesswoman Zhao Yan was brutally attacked by a US police officer.

He's performance, however, evolved via a more complicated path. His early performances dealt cautiously with a concern for both social and legal issues. *Golden Sunshine*, for example, was executed in a Chinese prison in 1999. After painting an entire wall gold, He was suspended in air holding a mirror that projected sunshine

into the dark corners of the prison. The most poignant moment of the performance was when He moved slowly across the wall in step with the sunlight. While this synchronized movement seemed to alleviate the overpowering issue of punishment, it also reminded viewers of the painful passage of time in prison. Eight prisoners participated in the performance as the artist's assistants. In addition, the artist performed the act in a penal institution because "he could not locate a secure site elsewhere." This notion flies in the face of government censorship, suggesting that the moral complexity of He's work was overlooked by the local audience.

As violent and physically challenging as He's performances appear to be, his ideas are deeply ingrained in Chinese aesthetics. For example, his cement cast performance, *Weisheng, Embracing the Column* (2003) refers to a well-known ancient legend from the *Zhuangzi*. Weisheng, the story's hero, was supposed to meet his lover under a bridge. When she failed to appear, the nearby river flooded. Weisheng refused to leave and drowned. In the actual performance, He had his arm cast in cement for 24 hours. The performance reflects on loyalty in our commercial society through highlighting the confrontation of passion and natural forces larger than life. In this piece, He dealt with water in a sculptural sense: while the river does not appear in the performance, the artist used cement ("water-mud" in Chinese) to represent water. In turn, the artist's body functions as an object that lies between sculpture and architecture. The viewer questions whether He is becoming part of the cement column (an architectural gesture) or turning the column into part of his physical being (a monumental and figurative gesture).

For the most part, He performs his art in remote and deserted areas. Regarding the Niagara Falls debacle, He felt that his act would go unnoticed in the vast landscape of the Falls. However, recent events in the US have transformed our understanding of tourist sites into expectations of "spectacular tourism." In fact, He was only observed and reported by a single tourist. It was the subsequent headlines that gave his piece a permanent place in the history of Chinese performance art.

Growing up beside a river in Yunnan province, He has always had a strong feeling for water. Whether in abstract form or literary expression, water and nature play a major role in his works. In some ways, his act of walking into the river above Niagara Falls is a reenactment of a brief Confucian saying: "I stand on the river and sigh: Alas, how the water flows away!" Yet what is flowing is not just water, but our destabilized concepts of time and place.

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■ He Yunchang — *Dialogue with Water* (1999) Performance. Courtesy the artist.